



Antonio Narducci

WHEN WILLIAM Boyd recently published his book on Nat Tate, a mysterious Abstract Expressionist painter, it was a disguised work of fiction and Boyd had no idea that exactly such a figure actually existed. Hardly anybody had heard of Antonio Narducci, despite his being a founding member of the Abstract Expressionist movement who had done nothing but dedicatedly make art for more than 60 years.

Whatever the reasons for his obscurity, Narducci was a highly trained professional painter who was an integral part of the most important movement of 20th-century American art but who only had one formal exhibition and subsequently refused to show his work. Narducci had the career profile of an eccentric "outsider" recluse, the difference being that he had spent years at art school, teaching and working on government commissions and both knew and was respected by the most famous artists of his era.

The culmination of all his creative labours was the PAN Art Museum and Institute (PAN for Pietro Antonio Narducci) in the small New Jersey town of Denville. Located on Main Street above a row of suburban shops, PAN is a warren of small rooms where Narducci lived and worked for the last 35 years; in previous decades the museum had been located just one block away. It was there that Narducci, obsessed with work, painted all day, every day, conducted optical experiments with unusual materials and gave occasional lessons to local students.

Every evening he put on a small show of his recent paintings for the townspeople, hung and spotlighted in the windows of his museum, the only venue he could trust to show his work in exactly the way he wanted. The PAN Museum now houses the entire Narducci archive – at a rough estimate over 2,000 works in a wide variety of media.

Narducci was born in 1915 in a small Italian mountain town in the Gran Sasso, where he could ski into the front room of his parents' house. He was largely raised by priests at the next-door Catholic church. His father left for America and when Narducci was 15 he followed, to escape Mussolini's Fascist recruitment of Italian youth. He joined his father in New Jersey and soon enrolled at the Leonardo da Vinci art school in Manhattan. In 1936 Narducci moved to the Beaux-Arts Institute of Design to study sculpture.

Having studied fresco restoration with the Metropolitan Museum, he began working as a painter for the Federal Arts Project, in the WPA (Works Project Administration) Mural Division and he won the Prix de Rome for one of his gigantic frescoes. This work was shown at Grand Central gallery along with work by Isamu Noguchi and other luminaries. Narducci's classical fresco of wild stallions was painted on a concrete wall so heavy it had to be delivered to the uptown gallery by horse-drawn wagon. When the show ended, the gallery did not know what to do with such a monumental work and let loose jealous students with sledgehammers.



Narducci: 'The Lizard'

It was the last time Narducci would show in public.

The two catalysts for his discovery of Abstract Expressionism and Modernism in general were, first, being introduced to Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* by an opera-singer girlfriend and then being led into the Cedar Tavern, an artists' watering-hole in Manhattan. Its roster of nascent stars included Jackson Pollock, Willem De Kooning, Sam Francis and Franz Kline, the latter becoming his closest friend in the group and indeed outside of it.

Narducci was known as "Tony" rather than Antonio and his Cedar Tavern nickname was "The Lizard" or "New Jersey Lizard from the Swamps" as he commuted to the bar from Denville. He was also known as "The Prince", because of his aristocratic airs.

The great love of his life was his wife, who went by the stage name of Muriel Reed, an Irish-Catholic-Russian-Jewish ballerina from a theatrical family. It was only after they married in 1943, with his best man the then curator of the Guggenheim Museum, that he discovered she could speak English. The marriage did not work out and in 1951 he was crushed by the simultaneous blow of divorce and the accidental death of his five-year-old only son.

In many ways this was a turning-point. Several of his old artist friends were already dead; the last time he had seen De Kooning the two of them sat on a New York sidewalk sharing a pastrami sandwich, then De Kooning drove back to the Hamptons and Narducci to New Jersey, neither of them ever to return to the city. Elaine de Kooning's words in a letter to Narducci's two daughters described both artists' situation; "Bill, too, is a recluse and never visits the city if he can help it. He just wants to stay in his studio and paint."

That was all Narducci wanted to do, but he also worked at various jobs, such as antique dealing. Planning to join the American air force he discovered he had signed up for American Airlines instead. He was employed there as a graphic artist and designed the company logo of an eagle which is still in use today. But Narducci slowly retreated into self-imposed exile in his museum, taking students but otherwise entirely refusing the outside world. Increasing agoraphobia and sensitivity to cold ensured he rarely left his quarters and would take a taxi just to visit his dentist a few streets away.

His aesthetic experimentations and steady creative evolution were for his eyes only. If his painting style had already changed from neoclassical to Ab Ex, such as the Nebula series of 1954 and cast-concrete sculpture like Apollonian, it then shifted dramatically again. Using an oscilloscope wired to a camera he kept on his fire escape pointing into the sun, Narducci began painting with light and sound waves, the first ever paintings done with the energy of the sun, abstract images captured on film and transformed into cybernetic paintings and huge sculptures such as Cosmic Woman, which was even wired for sound.

Narducci never ceased to try new techniques and considered that his personal breakthrough to the "next step" of purest creativity came in 1985 when he began using acrylics mixed with rainwater and ammonia, elements from the universe taken directly from nature. This series of Quintessential Aesthetics occupied him until his death and was a secret shared only with his children and occasional chosen students.

ADRIAN DANNATT

Pietro Antonio Narducci, artist: born Pietro Carmella, Italy 1 February 1915; married 1943 Muriel Reed (two daughters, and one son deceased; marriage dissolved 1951); died Denville, New Jersey 1 March 1999.